

Prairie Schooners and Army Contracts

By Aubrey Fullerton

NOW that the United States is definitely in the war, and determinedly facing the problem of raising an army, it will be confronted also with the perplexities and pitfalls of army contracts. Uncle Sam will have a taste of what Canada has already undergone. The number, size, and variety of these contracts will be in excess of anything the country has known before, just as the war that has necessitated them surpasses any-

thing else on record. By way of contrast it is of interest to look back to one of the first army contracts ever made in America.

Strangely enough, too, there is a connecting link between that early war-time transaction in one of the Atlantic states and certain phases of life in the Canadian West of to-day. The "prairie schooner" that is still occasionally seen on the trails of our western provinces, with its

usual load of immigrant settlers and effects, is lineal successor to a type of wagon that figured in the war for the possession of America and in the army contracts of the time. Through various changes and adaptations during 160 years, that particular style of wagon has come down to the present day, more or less closely identified with frontier history in both the United States and Canada. In its original form it was known as the Conestoga wagon, and as such was contracted for by the British army in the colonies. How it happened is an interesting bit of Anglo-American history.

There appeared in some of the old Pennsylvania newspapers in April, 1755, advertisements calling for the supply of 150 wagons, to be used in army service as directed by General Braddock. Farmers or other owners patriotically disposed were invited to loan their vehicles for the transportation of army stores and baggage at a rate of fifteen shillings a day for each wagon, with four horses and driver, and indemnity if the wagon was lost or broken while in government service. The notice further said that B. Franklin, whose name was attached, would receive offers at a certain place and time, paying seven days' hire in advance.

One of the most unfortunate exploits in eighteenth-century warfare hinged, at first, upon nothing more serious than the getting of a certain number of wagons. Had they not been obtainable, that particular chapter of military history might have been very different.

General Braddock, who had come over to take command of the British forces in America, had landed on the Virginia coast, and had then sent through the country round about for transport wagons with which to move his supplies overland

now a part of America's unwritten history. In due course it evolved into the plainer and smaller box wagon with the canvas top that we now know as the prairie schooner. The Conestoga wagon in its original form is seen no more.

The part played by this old-time vehicle in the affairs both of war and peace suggests the varied service given by other kinds and styles of wheelcraft. There was the old Red River cart, for instance, than which a more truly typical or picturesque rig never existed. Its place in Canadian history, and particularly in the records of early Manitoba, cannot be lost sight of.

As a matter of fact, the marks of the cart wheel run all through the common history of Canada. Everywhere between the two oceans there seem to have been natural running tracks for many kinds and forms of rigs, and the work they have done has gone into the building of the nation.

Why not a song of the cart, then, by some poet of to-day or to-morrow? The subject is a worthy one, and a suitable, for there's music in the rumbling of the Canadian cart. Or someone who can catch the spirit of the thing will perhaps do it into a prose epic.

The story, in verse or prose, will begin away back in the days of the European occupation when the first wilderness settlers built clumsy carriers for their meagre traffic, and blazed initial trails through the woods of Acadia. It will continue to the time of the French settlement in Quebec, and then into the days of pioneer Ontario, when on the streets of old York crude carts did what motor lorries do now. Halfway through the story its scenes will shift to the west, and its theme will then be how carts and wagons, simply fashioned but entirely efficient, were the forerunners of advanc-

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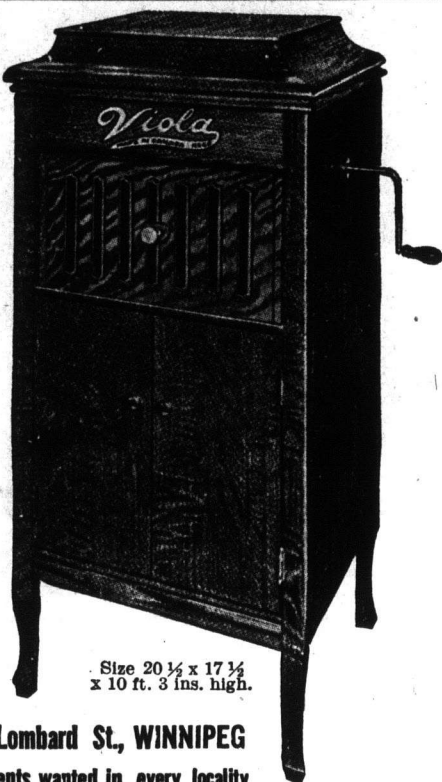
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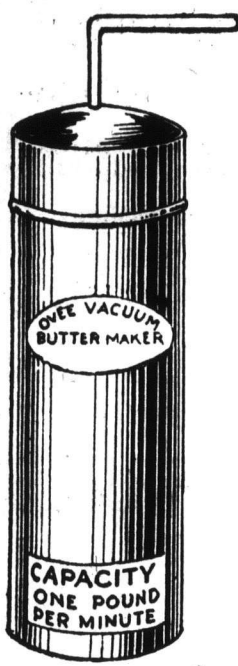
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The Conestoga Wagon of 100 years ago, forerunner of the Prairie Schooner

to the Ohio Valley. He had failed to get them, however, and was considering the abandonment of the expedition when Benjamin Franklin came to his assistance, told him there were hundreds of wagons in Pennsylvania, and undertook, in one of the earliest war contracts on record, to collect the number required.

Pennsylvania was the home of the Conestoga wagon, which, it occurred to Franklin, would make a good freight carrier for army supplies because it was so good a carrier for every other purpose. A long, hard march across the Alleghany Mountains soon afterwards proved its serviceability and the correctness of Franklin's judgment. In much the same way, the war of 1812 again called the wagon into service. As a vehicle of common industry this typically American rig was in use in the Eastern States for more than a century and a half, and in the latter days it even crossed the prairies.

The Conestoga wagon was a sort of boat on wheels, and its successor, the prairie schooner, was therefore not inaptly given a semi-nautical nickname. The original type, as it came from the workshop of some ingenious wheelwright at Conestoga, Pa., showed a long, boat-shaped body with a curved bottom, in which freight packed so snugly as to resist any amount of rough-road jolting. It had four broad-tired wheels that went safely through mud and swamp, and usually its motive power was four or six horses. Apart from the practical character of its construction and the rough gracefulness of its lines, there was a certain degree of picturesqueness about the wagon, by reason of the bright colors with which its body was painted and the white sail-like spread of canvas that covered the whole top, over arches of wood or iron. This served the double purpose of protection and adornment.

Seldom has a contrivance on wheels better met the needs of man than did this Conestoga wagon in ante-railroad days. How well it carried, how daintily it ventured into hard and untried places, is

ing civilization. To the open plains, and past the plains to the Rockies, the new epic will move even more swiftly, with stirring pictures of Indian fights, buffalo hunts, and gold miners' escapades, in all of which the rumbling wagon wheels had a part. Finally there will be the record of to-day, which will tell of farms, back-country freighting roads, and construction camps, where the cart is still in service.

The kind of men who drove these rigs, whence they came, and where they went; the homes they lived in, and the work they did; the current life and business of their time, and the gradual development of Canadian industry; the look of the country through which the carts and wagons were driven; the social scheme into which they fitted so well and adequately; these will all be in the story, and will give it substance. But the general theme will be the simple fact that wagon-wheels have been a factor making the history of Canada, and for that matter the history of all America. Even Benjamin Franklin, greatest man of his day, proved his value to king and country, in part, by means of a traffic in carry-all wagons. Incidentally, his war contracts in that particular case did not yield him a profit, but left him considerably poorer than before.

The Meanest Man

"I have spotted another 'meanest man.'" It was the fat plumber who spoke, as the Youngstown Telegram relates it. "Who is it this time?" the thin carpenter asked. "Umson." "What's Umson been doing?" "He took me to dinner with him in a swell hotel the other evening." "Do you call that mean?" "No, but listen." "I am listening." "When we had finished he took a small piece of tinfoil that had covered a little square of cheese—" "Uh huh—" "Placed it on a silver dollar to get a perfect impression—" "Yes—" "And then left the impression on his plate so the waiter would think he was getting a fine tip."